

Congresswoman Betty McCollum

Serving Minnesota's 4th Congressional District

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Congresswoman McCollum's Remarks Before the Midwest Alliance of Sovereign Tribes

Thank you, Councilman Whitebird, for that introduction. Ribs is a dear friend who has welcomed me many times to his community and is probably tired of hearing me speak! It is an honor to be here with you to discuss the important issues facing tribal communities across the nation and here in the Midwest.

I want to thank MAST for the invitation to speak and for their leadership on tribal issues throughout the years. I also want to recognize Debbie Ho and John Harte, strong advocates and voices for Native issues in Washington, DC. And thank you to the Shakopee Community and Chairman Crooks for welcoming all of us and hosting this event in their beautiful facility here in Minnesota.

I'm grateful for this opportunity today, because the issues your communities experience matter. And I'm thankful for all the gracious Minnesota tribes who educated me on the nuances of Indian history and disastrous policies.

Thank you, Bois Forte, Fond du Lac, Grand Portage, Leech Lake, Lower Sioux, Mille Lacs, Prairie Island, Red Lake, Shakopee, Upper Sioux and White Earth.

You all helped me understand, and continue to assist and support me in my work in Congress. My job there is to be a voice and a vote for the communities I represent. In our communities, where ever they might be, we have to fight to keep our families strong and ensure we are economically viable. I care because I want tribal children, elders, families and communities to have every single opportunity that everyone else in this country has.

When I worked in the state legislature here in Minnesota I had the first opportunity to really work with tribes. I saw firsthand how Native Americans were treated unfairly by this state. These experiences with state and federal government showed me why we must work together advocates for needs of American Indians. More people from Indian Country need to run for office and work in our government. Your voices, your concerns and your wishes must be heard.

In order for this to happen there needs to be people at the table to stand up, work with and work for the American Indian community. When the federal government failed to provide you with resources for your families and communities, you looked for other opportunities -- one was gaming. You know all too well how you must be vigilant to protect this source of revenue.

There is something I want you all to know about me. I have never supported an expansion of non-tribal gaming, and I will not support it. I will work with you to stop any expansion.

Our state is fortunate because we have tribes who have been successful in gaming, and taken those resources to improve the quality of life in their communities. That is something that should be celebrated. They provide services that the federal government should be delivering promised, like health care and education. Many of the successful tribes are reaching out to create opportunities for brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles in order to create hope in communities who need help. You are working hard to have sustainability in the future, by your diversification into non-gaming businesses.

The federal government has many trust responsibilities to the American Indian people. Thankfully, there have been a few success stories recently. Washington is paying attention to you now. I am, but so is President Obama, Speaker Pelosi and the rest of Democratic leadership.

Our President held a historic consultation with tribal leaders and ordered the federal agencies to do the same. It was a very historic meeting -- one I will never forget. With Democrats in leadership we finally reauthorized Indian Health Care by including it in our national health reform legislation. This was a permanent reauthorization -- no longer will you have to wait and wait. This means access to preventative care, and much-needed help for youth suicide prevention and mental health and chemical health treatment. This means more flexibility for tribes to administer funds. No one knows your families' and your communities' needs better than you do.

Right now I'm working with leaders at Mille Lacs to get a dialysis center built. This reauthorization is a step forward. I've visited the health centers here in Minnesota and all across the country, and I know they are overcrowded and need help, and that means dollars to rebuild.

A few months ago, I was present when the Tribal Law and Order bill was signed into law. I heard a woman share a very tragic story of what had happened to her and no one helped. This legislation was badly needed. I don't have to tell you that there aren't enough law enforcement officers patrolling reservations. Too many violent crime and sexual assault cases are not prosecuted by federal law enforcement. This legislation will lead to more justice and enforcement of community standards of respect and safety by increasing penalties and establishing protocols to address sexual violence.

These positive changes will come from coordination among everyone involved in investigation and prosecution - federal agencies, law enforcement officials and tribal communities.

There have also been big gains in Indian Education, including:

- Securing \$50 million for the Bureau of Indian Education schools in the Education Jobs Fund signed into law in August.

- Stronger funding for Esther Martinez language programs, because we must ensure the preservation and recovery of Native languages.

- Increasing Title VII funding and ensuring that the Department of Education focuses on appropriate goals - meeting the unique educational and culturally-related academic needs of American Indian students.

But there is still much work that needs to be done.

As you know, with the Carciari ruling, the Supreme Court created two classes of tribes. This was not the intent of Congress. All tribes, regardless of when they were recognized, should be treated the same in the eyes of the federal government, no matter the issue. Land into trust issues are no different.

The Congress must clarify its intent that all federally recognized tribes, regardless of their recognition date, can ask the Secretary of Interior to take land into trust for them. The Carciari fix must be passed and signed into law, and I'm proud to have voted to include it in the Interior Appropriations bill.

This year I sought out a position on the Interior Appropriations subcommittee, and I'm thankful. Now I am at the table to help Congress also needs to approve the \$3.4 billion Cobell settlement. It passed the House with my vote in May, but has been obstructed in the Senate. We cannot keep extending this deadline, and tribal members whose trust accounts were mismanaged by the government have waited too long for compensation.

Our work is far from finished. We must continue to move forward. We can't go back to a government that does not understand the federal trust responsibility. To a government that can't even define sovereignty, much less protect it. Or back to a government that tries to pass legislation and enforce laws without trying to understand the unique government-to-government relationship with the 564 tribes.

We need to move forward.

I am joined by the leadership in Congress and the White House in our commitment to American Indians. But I'm looking into the future, and let me tell you, I see storm clouds brewing. It's going to be rough. And it's going to be toughest on communities that need the most help. The programs that assist our most vulnerable citizens - our elderly and

our children and our poor - are going to be on the chopping block. And that's likely going to include many Native programs. Unfortunately, that means we have to shift gears. I, like you, would rather be playing offense and scoring - trying to make strategic investments in programs that we know work.

It is my hope that on Nov 2nd we do not have to go back on the defense, back to having to prevent really harsh cuts from taking place. I can't do it without you. I look forward to working together, to telling a story together, to standing together and to fighting together for your communities and all communities. To give those who have no voice one that is strong, clear and proud.

These are all priorities for my work as a representative of St. Paul, as a member of the Appropriations Committee, and as a member of the Native American Caucus. I have a vision for our caucus - one in which we're at the table when these big decisions are made -- that the voice of your community is invited to participate. When leadership listens to the Congressional Black Caucus, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and the Congressional Asian Caucus - leadership includes the Native American Caucus too. That also means electing more leaders from your communities.

I've taken a first step to show that we are not going to back down. It started with a seemingly simple request, that I could see a comprehensive Native budget so I could examine spending on Native programs across the federal budget. When my office asked for this at the Congressional Research Service, my staff was told it was "impossible." I wrote the OMB and asked for it. And they fought it. So I demanded it. I was prepared to use every tool we had, and when they figured that out, they finally agreed to work with me. And now you can see it. It's only a few pieces of paper, but it took me a year to get it! And for the first time, this information is public and on their website.

We appropriators need to be able to look at the aggregate impact of federal funding of Native programs over time, so that inadequate funding cannot be ignored anymore. I've seen the effects of an inconsistently monitored budget when I've visited the tribes here in Minnesota and across the country. I have more to learn, more people to listen to, and more places to visit. If I haven't been to your reservation, I hope you'll invite me and share the successes and challenges of your community with me. And if I have visited, I want to come back and see your progress!

I hope you will also invite other Members to walk in your communities. We take Congressional Delegation trips to other countries, and I think we need to take them to reservations. Even if Members do not have tribal land in their district or state, they still vote on the issues that affect you. And when you are in DC, come see us.

This is your opportunity to hold the administration accountable, hold Members of Congress accountable, and hold me accountable. Hold us accountable for our rhetoric, our votes and our action. Let's begin building the foundation for a true trust relationship today - right now.

With that, I welcome your feedback, comments and questions to begin the conversation.

Congresswoman Betty McCollum serves on the House Appropriations and Budget Committees.

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